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Guidelines for Ecotourism Operations in the Great Plains

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Ecotourism

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature defines ecotourism as:

Environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples.

Ecotourism has the potential to support communities and conservation efforts from revenue streams to parks and reserves in the Great Plains, while also contributing to a culture shift towards a conservation ethic. Recent surges in ecotourism have contributed to growth in the tourism sectors in Great Plains states, because these approaches to tourism can leverage the open spaces, natural landscapes, and culture and heritage of the region.

Facilities, Food, Activities, Guest Care, and Environment Awareness

This resource is designed to support the planning, growth, and development of ecotourism facilities that offer beds, activities, and food to guests. We selected five components of ecotourism for use in guidelines and evaluations for ecotourism operations: facilities, activities, food, guest care, and environmental awareness. Tourists vary in their expectations and needs, and ecotourism operations vary in their goals and investment potential. One path to business success is to meet expectations of guests.

This publication provides rubrics that describe expectations for the five ecotourism components at each level (1-star to 5-star). Achievement of higher levels of guest expectations may require more design, planning, and investment, and clients may pay more for facilities that achieve higher levels. Each facilities' goals should dictate the level at which they wish to operate. These evaluation guidelines were developed after considerable experience at domestic and international facilities.



I. Facilities

Facilities score: average rating across 7 characteristics

Characteristic	◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆◆	◆◆◆◆◆
Room furnishings	<i>Basic necessities present, perhaps worn but serviceable, no reading lights, little luggage storage, no extras, no hygiene products</i>	<i>Basic necessities present, not worn, reading lights, luggage storage, no extras, basic hygiene products</i>	<i>Necessities present, fixtures of good quality, reading lights, luggage storage, expanded set of hygiene products available</i>	<i>Extras available such as coffee/tea station, high quality furnishings, complete set of hygiene products available, and a quality “planned room”</i>	<i>Highest quality fixtures, impressive, unique, extras present, high quality hygiene products available, an impressive plan for the room</i>
Room cleanliness	<i>Clean, some stains or wear present</i>	<i>Clean, no stains or wear</i>	<i>Clean, no stains or wear</i>	<i>Impressively clean, noticeably shiny surfaces</i>	<i>Impressively clean, noticeably shiny surfaces</i>
Décor/linens	<i>Not coordinated, but serviceable</i>	<i>Basic décor and linens are coordinated</i>	<i>Décor and linens coordinated</i>	<i>Themed décor, with artistic displays</i>	<i>Unique, themed décor with high quality, artistic displays</i>
Room size	<i>Small, less space around bed, little space for luggage and storage</i>	<i>Average size room with some space for luggage and storage</i>	<i>Good size with acceptable space for luggage and storage</i>	<i>Spacious room, can be rearranged to some extent, perhaps with a sitting area</i>	<i>Noticeably spacious room, perhaps a suite</i>
View from room	<i>No view, 1 or fewer windows</i>	<i>>1 window, limited garden view</i>	<i>>1 window landscape view</i>	<i>Landscape view is an attraction or feature of the room</i>	<i>Landscape view is a part of the room’s design</i>
Bed/mattress	<i>Basic and sturdy and functional</i>	<i>Basic and sturdy and functional</i>	<i>Mid-grade mattress, sturdy</i>	<i>Bed is noticeably comfortable, could lounge on the bed</i>	<i>High quality mattress, an inviting bed, could lounge on the bed</i>
Bathroom entrance	<i>Privacy curtain or door</i>	<i>Privacy curtain or door</i>	<i>Door</i>	<i>Door</i>	<i>Door</i>

II. Food

Facilities score: average rating across 4 characteristics

Characteristic	◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆◆	◆◆◆◆◆
Meals available	<i>Breakfast</i>	<i>Breakfast and lunch</i>	<i>Breakfast, lunch, and dinner, coffee and tea in afternoon</i>	<i>Breakfast, lunch, and small-selection dinner, coffee and tea any time, bar any time</i>	<i>Breakfast, lunch, and diverse selection dinner, coffee and tea any time, bar any time</i>
Connection of menu to “place”	<i>No connection; meal could be served anywhere</i>	<i>No connection; meal could be served anywhere</i>	<i>Homemade smoked meat, jam, or bread for breakfast or other meals</i>	<i>Homemade items for meals, unique dishes, local wines or foods, perhaps a themed meal for dinner of regional food</i>	<i>Homemade items for meals, unique and creative dishes, local wines or foods, meals planned to provide connection to region, eco-friendly: local suppliers.</i>
Personal experience or touches during the meal	<i>None</i>	<i>Meal served by family that owns facility</i>	<i>Meal served by family or by staff with explicit connection to local area</i>	<i>Meal served by family or by staff with explicit connection to local area, music or other small entertainment provided with local theme</i>	<i>Meal served by family or by staff from local area, personal attention by chef or entertainment by staff with explicit local connection</i>
Dining facility	<i>Generic dining facility, could duplicate elsewhere</i>	<i>Generic dining facility, could duplicate elsewhere</i>	<i>Meal served in family’s dining room or in dining area themed for landscape</i>	<i>Exquisite facility with connections to the landscape, hard to duplicate elsewhere</i>	<i>Eco-friendly dining facility, unique experience (outside, view, décor) with explicit connections to landscape, impossible to duplicate elsewhere</i>

III. Activity

Facilities score: average rating across 4 characteristics

Characteristic	◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆◆	◆◆◆◆◆
Types of public areas	<i>Lobby</i>	<i>Lobby and garden</i>	<i>Lobby, garden, and veranda, areas are inviting</i>	<i>Well-planned lobby, garden, veranda, and personal deck or patio with room</i>	<i>Exceptionally planned lobby, garden, veranda, and personal deck or patio with room, areas are a feature of the establishment</i>
Activities available	<i>Facility is near adjacent attractions, no attractions available on-site</i>	<i>Self-service attractions: books, games, trail, yard or fields, wildlife viewing opportunities</i>	<i>Signed or self-guiding hiking trails with emphasis on plants and geology, self-drive for wildlife viewing with waterhole, lake, or sunset spots for relaxation, viewing and photography</i>	<i>Guided drives for wildlife or landscape viewing, guided hikes or photo safaris or hunting or sundowners or cultural experiences</i>	<i>Unique opportunities to view rare wildlife, unique cultural experiences, geology and plant guided tours, private al fresco meals, ballooning, or other private, unique experiences</i>
View for activities	<i>View is not unique during activities</i>	<i>View is not unique during activities</i>	<i>Landscape views, views with focus on vegetation or geology</i>	<i>Larger view that is part of the attraction, activities designed for the view</i>	<i>View during activities has little sign of other humans activity, view is feature of the attraction to activities</i>
Conservation engagement during activities	<i>None</i>	<i>Indirect engagement, landscape is used but facility does not work to support conservation efforts directly</i>	<i>Direct engagement, activity demonstrates conservation efforts on the property</i>	<i>Direct engagement, activity demonstrates conservation efforts on property or beyond borders</i>	<i>Activity demonstrates conservation connections with neighbors or watershed members</i>

IV. Guest Care

Facilities score: average rating across 3 characteristics

Characteristic	◆	◆ ◆	◆ ◆ ◆	◆ ◆ ◆ ◆	◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆
Arrival procedures	<i>Reception well-marked and staffed, directions provided to room</i>	<i>Reception well-marked and staffed, friendly instructions for meals, tips on activities and facility use, guests shown to room by staff</i>	<i>Reception well-marked and staffed, friendly instructions for meals, tips on activities and facility use, guests shown to room by staff</i>	<i>Reception staffed and guest met with welcome beverage (juice), support staff provides schedule of activities, luggage assistance provided as staff show guests to room</i>	<i>Reception staffed and guest met with welcome beverage (juice), guests taken to unique area (view, special room) to discuss their stay, luggage assistance provided as staff show guests to room</i>
Maid Service	<i>None</i>	<i>Laundry available</i>	<i>Laundry available</i>	<i>Laundry available, beds have fancy-fold towels, rooms show unique care by staff and a connection to the staff</i>	<i>Laundry available, beds have fancy-fold towels, rooms show unique care by staff and a connection to the staff, beds are turned down during dinner</i>
Staff interactions during visit	<i>No special interactions planned</i>	<i>Staff provide some personal attention before meals</i>	<i>Owner or manager provides personal attention, perhaps a social hour is available for guest interactions</i>	<i>Designated staff member discusses activities or assists with scheduling, social hour is available, local staff singers or entertainment</i>	<i>Superior attentiveness of owner, manager and/or staff, local staff singers or entertainment</i>

V. Environmental Awareness

Facilities score: average rating across 6 characteristics

Characteristic	◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆◆	◆◆◆◆◆
Waste	<i>Recycling available</i>	<i>Recycling available</i>	<i>Recycling and composting available</i>	<i>Waste-reduction plan in effect beyond recycling and composting</i>	<i>Waste-reduction plan in effect beyond recycling and composting, waste is purposely on-site (livestock food, fuel, etc.)</i>
Facilities	<i>Energy-efficient light bulbs</i>	<i>Energy-efficient light bulbs and appliances</i>	<i>Energy-efficient light bulbs and appliances, buildings designed to reduce energy consumption</i>	<i>Energy-efficient light bulbs and appliances, buildings designed to reduce energy consumption and use natural heating</i>	<i>Energy-efficient light bulbs and appliances, buildings designed to reduce energy consumption and use natural heating, low-impact buildings</i>
Food	<i>Nothing special</i>	<i>Basic attention to environment in menu selection</i>	<i>Local food</i>	<i>Local food, raise own meat or vegetables</i>	<i>Local food, raise own meat and vegetables, energy-efficient cooking plan</i>
Water use	<i>Encourage responsible use</i>	<i>Encourage responsible use</i>	<i>Encourage responsible use</i>	<i>Measure water use, re-use gray water</i>	<i>Measure water use, re-use gray water, may have sewage re-use plan, emphasis on water use is a part of the activities for all guests</i>
Power supply	<i>Encourage responsible use</i>	<i>Encourage responsible use</i>	<i>Encourage responsible use, alternative energy plan</i>	<i>Auxiliary use of solar or wind to supplement normal power supply</i>	<i>Off-grid, solar or wind powered</i>
Activities	<i>Nothing special</i>	<i>Activities focus on environment and human responsibility</i>	<i>Activities are selected for offering to be low-impact, provide awareness</i>	<i>Low-impact activities, fuel consumption plan, activities constructed to engage in environmental awareness</i>	<i>Activities are selected to radically minimize carbon footprint, very low-impact, and engage in environmental awareness</i>



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